

id: 209933
date: 6/3/2009 13:23
refid: 09DAMASCUS384
origin: Embassy Damascus
classification: SECRET//NOFORN
destination:
header:
VZCZCXRO9472
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0384/01 1541323
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 031323Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6431
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000384

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2018
TAGS: PREL, SY
SUBJECT: RE-ENGAGING SYRIA: DEALING WITH SARG DIPLOMACY

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (S/NF) Summary: As the U.S. continues its re-engagement with Syria, it may help us achieve our goals if we understand how SARG officials pursue diplomatic goals. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad is neither as shrewd nor as long-winded as his father but he, too, prefers to engage diplomatically on a level of abstraction that seems designed to frustrate any direct challenge to Syria's behavior and, by extension, his judgment. Bashar's vanity represents another Achilles heel: the degree to which USG visitors add to his consequence to some degree affects the prospects for a successful meeting. The SARG foreign policy apparatus suffers from apparent dysfunctionality and weaknesses in terms of depth and resources but the SARG punches above its weight because of the talents of key individuals. SARG officials generally have clear, if tactical, guidance from Bashar and they are sufficiently professional to translate those instructions into recognizable diplomatic practice. But in a diplomatic world that is generally oiled by courtesy and euphemism, the Syrians don't hesitate to be nasty in order to achieve their objectives. The behaviors they employ as diplomatic "force-multipliers" are the hallmarks of a Syrian diplomatic style that is at best abrasive and, at its worst, brutal.

End Summary.

Gaming Out the SARG

2. (S/NF) As the U.S. moves forward to re-engage Syria, we are well aware that Syrian officials have long been famous for their abilities as tough negotiators. The late President Hafiz al-Asad could wear down his interlocutors through sheer staying power in 10-hour meetings without breaks; the wealth of detail and historical perspective he brought to those discussions also tested the mettle of those who were attempting to persuade him to a course of action he questioned. His son Bashar is neither as shrewd nor as long-winded as his father but he, too, prefers to engage diplomatically on a level of abstraction that seems designed to frustrate any direct challenge to Syria's behavior and, by extension, his judgment. Bashar's presentations on world affairs suggest that he would prefer to see himself as a sort of philosopher-king, the Pericles of Damascus. Playing to Bashar's intellectual pretensions is one stratagem for gaining his confidence and acquiescence; it may be time-consuming but could well produce results. Bashar's vanity represents another Achilles heel: the degree to which USG visitors add to his consequence to some degree affects the prospects for achieving our goals. Every interaction we have with the SARG is, in fact, a transaction and the better equipped we are to understand the dynamics of our negotiations the better able we will be to achieve our objectives. Post has assembled the compendium below in an attempt to reflect our experience in dealing with the SARG in the hope that Washington-based interlocutors will find it useful.

A Compendium of Diplomatic Behaviors

3. (S/NF) Capacity: SARG scope of action is limited the President's span of control. He is generally able to monitor the activities of his foreign minister, political/media advisor, intelligence chiefs, and brother Maher. At various times, his vice president and national security advisor are also active and therefore under his direct supervision. While communication flows between him and his subordinates, it appears not to be formalized and information is highly compartmented. Subordinates' portfolios are not clearly delineated; overlapping areas create tension and competition. There is no "interagency" policy development process that lays out advantages and disadvantages of policy choices. There are, as far as we know, no briefing or decision memos. The bench is not deep; beyond the principals lie only a few trusted staffers. Bashar and his team also find it difficult to juggle more than one major foreign policy issue at a time.

4. (S/NF) Protocol: SARG officials are sticklers for diplomatic protocol, although they are not experts on the international conventions from which it is derived. The SARG places a high value on protocolary forms that ensure respectful treatment of state officials (despite bilateral differences) because such forms guarantee that the President and his representatives are shown proper courtesies by a

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world that is often at odds with Syria. (This focus on protocol underlies the continuing Syrian unhappiness over the absence of a U.S. ambassador.) Protocol conventions also reinforce the notion of equal relations between sovereign states and the SARG insists that communications between it and foreign embassies comply with traditional diplomatic practice. The MFA receives a flood of diplomatic notes from Damascus-based foreign missions daily which are apportioned out to various offices for action. The diplomatic notes, translated into Arabic by the senders, become the paper trail for SARG decisions. The MFA bureaucracy does not appear to generate cover memoranda that provide background to requests or recommendations for decisions. Many such notes, possibly all notes from the U.S. Embassy, are sent to the Minister himself for review. The MFA does not have internal email, only fax and phone. Instructions to Syrian missions abroad are often sent by fax; sometimes the MFA fails to provide instructions at all.

5. (S/NF) The Suq: In dealing with the U.S., the Syrians see every encounter as a transaction. The level and composition of the Syrian side of any meeting is carefully calculated in terms of protocol and the political message being sent; a lunch invitation must be interpreted as more than just the Arab compulsion to hospitality) who hosts the lunch is as important as who attends the meetings. When it comes to content, the Syrians seek to gain the highest value deliverable for the lowest price or no price at all. During the re-engagement process, the SARG has attempted to extract high profile USG gestures in exchange for relief of operational constraints on the Embassy. The SARG has been uncharacteristically forward-leaning in allowing discussions on a New Embassy Compound site to develop as far as they have; actual closure on a land deal, however, is probably contingent on U.S. delivery of a SARG desirable, e.g., the announcement that a U.S. ambassador will be sent to Damascus.

The SARG's focus on embassy operations is in part rooted in their paranoia over USG intelligence collection and penetration of Syrian society but the imposition of constraints on mission activities has also conveniently created an embassy list of desiderata that the SARG seeks to use as cost-free concessions. FM Muallim candidly acknowledged this approach when he commented in February to Charge that he had not yet decided what he needed in exchange for permission to reopen the American School in Damascus.

6. (S/NF) Vanity and Self-preservation: The President's self-image plays a disproportionate role in policy formulation and diplomatic activity. Meetings, visits, trips abroad that enhance his respectability and prestige are pursued; encounters that may involve negotiations or difficult debate are declined or delegated to subordinates. The President responds with anger if he finds himself challenged by visitors, but not until after the meeting. He seems to avoid direct confrontation. When engaged in summit diplomacy, he often seeks to include allies to bolster his confidence (e.g., Quadripartite Summit in September 2008, Riyadh Summit in April 2009). His foreign policy subordinates are all "employees" without constituencies or influence independent of the President's favor. Their overriding concern when engaging foreigners is to avoid the appearance of overstepping or violating their instructions. They are particularly cautious in the presence of other Syrians; requests to meet one-on-one often yield more expansive and candid responses.

7. (S/NF) Deceit: SARG officials at every level lie. They persist in a lie even in the face of evidence to the contrary. They are not embarrassed to be caught in a lie. While lower level officials often lie to avoid potential punitive action from their own government, senior level officials generally lie when they deem a topic too "dangerous" to discuss (e.g., Al-Kibar, IAEA) or when they have not yet determined whether or how to respond (FFN, Hezbollah arms supplies, etc). When a senior SARG official is lying, the key challenge is not demonstrating the lack of veracity but discovering the true reasons for it.

8. (S/NF) Passivity: SARG foreign policy is formulated in response to external developments (changes in regional leadership, initiatives from the West, etc). The SARG does not launch initiatives and generally seeks cover from allies when exploring new courses of action. The SARG is much more confident on the Arab level than on the international level. SARG policy responses are generally tactical and operational, exploratory rather than decisive, oblique instead of direct. Strategy, to the extent it exists, emerges from a series of tactical choices. The lack of initiative appears rooted in

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an underlying sense of diplomatic powerlessness. Every foreign policy embarrassment in Syria's history lies under the surface of a generally false projection of assertiveness. That assertiveness is sometimes read as arrogance.

9. (S/NF) Antagonism: Every Syrian diplomatic relationship contains an element of friction. There is some current friction, for example, in the Syrians' relations with the Turks and the French. The Syrians are not troubled by discord; they seek an upper hand in any relationship by relying on foreign diplomats' instinctive desire to resolve

problems. By withholding a solution, the SARG seeks to control the pace and temperature of the relationship. SARG officials artificially restrict their availability and can engage in harsh verbal attacks to intimidate and rattle foreign diplomats. SARG officials delight in disparaging their interlocutors behind their backs for allowing themselves to be cowed. On the international level, the President has indulged in personal criticisms of foreign leaders; unlike his father, he deliberately makes enemies when he doesn't necessarily have to. FM Muallim can behave similarly but he probably does so on the President's instructions.

10. (S/NF) Complacency: SARG leadership genuinely believes that SARG foreign policy has been, is being, and will be vindicated by events. They also genuinely believe their foreign policy is based on morally defensible and intellectually solid principles, although it is usually reactive and opportunistic. Existing policy choices are immutable unless the President decides to change them, in which case, his new policies, despite any appearances to the contrary, are consistent with "traditional" principles. Baathism infuses foreign policy principles (Pan-Arabism) but pragmatism is more important. More recently, Bashar's like or dislike of other leaders plays a role in policy formulation.

11. (S/NF) The Non Sequitur: When Syrian officials don't like a point that has been made to them, they frequently resort to an awkward changes in subject to deflect perceived criticism. Syrian officials seem to think they've scored a verbal hit by employing a facile non sequitur, usually in the form of a counter-accusation. When the SARG's human rights record is raised with Muallim, for example, he often raises Israel's December-January Gaza operation or, more recently, asks if the U.S. will accept the 1300 Al Qaeda sympathizers in Syrian jails. The non sequitur is intended to stop discussion of the unwelcome topic while subtly intimidating the interlocutor with the threat of raising a subject that is putatively embarrassing to him or her. When the non sequitur is deployed, it is clear that the SARG official is on the defensive.

12. (S/NF) Comment: Given the apparent dysfunctionality of the SARG foreign policy apparatus and its weaknesses in terms of depth and resources, the SARG's ability to punch above its weight internationally is noteworthy. Much of its strength appears to lie in the talents of key individuals and their ability to collaborate with each other, despite tensions and rivalries. SARG officials generally have clear, if tactical, guidance from Bashar and they are sufficiently professional to translate those instructions into recognizable diplomatic practice. But the behaviors they employ as diplomatic "force-multipliers" are the hallmarks of a Syrian diplomatic style that is at best abrasive and, at its worst, brutal. At the end of the day, there are few who really like to deal with the Syrians. The SARG, well aware of its reputation,

however, spends much of its energy ensuring that we have to.

CONNELLY

=====CABLE ENDS=====